

Ride on PT boat a thrill for Navy veteran Flynn

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The P.T. 658 in Portland, Ore., is the only patrol torpedo boat remaining in operation. / BOB FLYNN/The Jackson Sun

Bob Flynn had never seen a PT boat, aside from watching the movie "PT 109" and the 1960s television series "McHale's Navy," starring Ernest Borgnine. So Flynn, a former Navy lieutenant, was delighted last weekend to get to ride on PT 658, the only fully restored and operational U.S. Navy PT boat in the world.

He got the chance in Portland, Ore., where the crew of his ship, the USS Litchfield County, had its second reunion. The first was in Indianapolis in 2009, 40 years after most of the guys left the service.

Flynn is 67 and lives in Jackson with Maggie Joy, his bride of almost 39 years. He graduated from Adams State College in Colorado in 1966 and entered the Navy officer candidate school in Newport, R.I.

"It was the coldest winter of my life," Flynn said, laughing.

He was commissioned as an ensign in March 1967 and went to sea on the USS Litchfield County, an LST, which stands for landing ship tank or "large slow target," Flynn said.

An LST, with a crew of about 100, transports personnel and heavy equipment and is capable of delivering its cargo onto a beach. The front of the ship opens, and trucks, tanks, you name it, drive on ramps out of the ship and onto land.

Flynn spent a year in Vietnam at Da Nang and Chu Lai and about 18 months on ship. He left the Navy in June 1970 after three years and eight months.

He was surprised earlier this year when reunion organizer George Lyngheim called and asked if he would like to be one of 10 people who would ride on PT 658.

"I don't know how he got my name, but I was ready to go," Flynn said.

PT stands for "patrol torpedo" boat. Used in World War II, they were fast, wooden vessels, 76 to 80 feet long, armed with torpedoes and automatic weapons and manned by a crew of up to 17.

The movie "PT 109" helped make the boats famous in the general public. Released in 1963, it tells the story of President John F. Kennedy's experiences as commander of PT 109 during World War II.

Museums house some PT boats, but few survived after the war. And PT 658 is the only one still in action. It is moored at the Navy and Marine Reserve Readiness Center on Swan Island, Ore.

On July 23, with Flynn on board, the PT 658 motored 10 miles up the Willamette River to the Milwaukie Daze Festival, where visitors lined up to tour the boat and hear stories about the role of PT boats in the war.

"It was only the second time they had taken the boat out," Flynn said. "They are still restoring her. Each of us got to steer the boat for a couple of minutes, and we got to point the anti-aircraft gun and act as if we were shooting down water towers and apartment buildings. It was a lot of fun."

Donations are welcome to help restore PT 658. You can find more information at www.savetheptboatinc.com.

Flynn is glad he got to experience a ride on a PT boat and relive old times with his Navy buddies.

"It was real good to have water under my feet again," he said.

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